

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-AWASHINGTON TIMES
15 May 1987

Courier implicates White House aide

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Lt. Col. Oliver North's private courier between two Nicaraguan Contra leaders told Congress yesterday he carried cash, top-secret maps and weapons lists between Washington and Central America under Col. North's direction.

In dramatic testimony before the Iran-Contra investigative committee late yesterday, Robert W. Owen revealed that a White House official, Johnathan Miller, helped him cash traveler's checks from Col. North's safe for the Nicaraguan resistance.

Mr. Miller, who was an assistant administrator to President Reagan, resigned yesterday within an hour after Mr. Owen implicated him in the affair.

He is the first White House official to resign because of revelations in the public Iran-Contra hearings.

Mr. Owen, who carried out a variety of missions for Col. North, said he paid several thousand dollars to one Nicaraguan Indian leader in the spring of 1985 to walk out of negotiations with the Sandinista government and join the rebel front.

"I said we, the powers that be, wanted to continue to support him as best we could," said Mr. Owen, who did not name the recipient of the payoff.

"There was in a way a quid pro quo," he said. "The feeling was that if he went to the negotiations with the Sandinistas, and he walked out of it because he believed they were not going to be successful, then we would try and help him and help the other members of the resistance work together as a united front against the Sandinistas."

In a testy opening statement, Mr. Owen described himself as a "private foot soldier" with deep belief in the Contra cause. He then refused to

answer committee questions until he was ordered to do so under a grant of limited immunity. Under the order, his congressional testimony cannot be used against him in criminal proceedings.

Mr. Owen was recruited by Col. North from the public relations firm of Gray & Co. in the fall of 1984, shortly after Congress banned U.S. aid to the Contras. The ban continued for two years.

But Mr. Owen, whose alias was "T.C." for "The Courier," yesterday described how Col. North provided intelligence information, financial assistance and other services needed by the Contras.

Col. North, who was fired from the National Security Council staff in November when the Iran-Contra affair was exposed, kept traveler's checks for the Contras in his office safe in the Old Executive Office

Building next door to the White House, according to Mr. Owen.

Mr. Owen said the traveler's checks came from Contra leader Adolfo Calero, whose bank accounts were being funded by donations from foreign countries. He did not explain why the checks had been sent to Col. North.

Mr. Owen said he was private citizen while serving as a courier between Col. North and the Contras. He was paid \$2,500 a month plus expenses from Contra funds, he said.

Earlier yesterday, the special committee questioned former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane about his and Col. North's role in soliciting Contra aid from other countries.

Mr. McFarlane refused to characterize as "solicitations" his meetings with Saudi officials and others who made payments to the Contras. But Gaston Sigur, assistant secretary of state for Far East and Pacific affairs, told the committee that Col. North asked him to solicit money in the summer of 1985 from an unnamed Asian country, believed to be Taiwan.

Mr. Owen made numerous trips to Central America, carrying cash to various Contra leaders and bringing

back lists of the weapons and other supplies they needed. In one secret memo found by the FBI in Col. North's office, Mr. Owen told Col. North, known as "Steelhammer," about the "toys" the Contras wanted, referring to weapons.

Col. North asked Mr. Owen to carry top-secret maps and photos to Mr. Calero, whose alias was "Sparkplug." When Mr. Owen asked the colonel about the source of the materials, Mr. Owen said he was told they were "from across the river," referring apparently to the Pentagon or CIA.

On one occasion, Mr. Owen gave an envelope full of money to a Contra leader visiting Washington, who picked it up from a passing car on a cold, rainy night in front of the Old Executive Office Building. The leader needed money for hotel bills and food.

Mr. Owen acted as an intermediary between Mr. Calero and retired Army Maj. Gen. John Singlaub, who was selling the Contras \$5 million in weapons in June 1985. Mr. Owen conferred with the general in Denver and met with Mr. Calero in San Francisco to help consummate the deal.

Wrapping up its second week of public hearings, the Iran-Contra committee yesterday focused on administration assistance to the Contras during the congressional ban on aid.

Members of the committee questioned the wisdom of enlisting foreign countries in the Contra cause.

Rep. Ed Jenkins, Georgia Democrat, raised concerns about one foreign country — presumably Taiwan — contributing to the Contra cause in the fall of 1985 when Congress was working on a measure to restrict textile imports.

Mr. Reagan subsequently vetoed the bill, which would have harmed the Taiwan textile industry.

Mr. Jenkins, who did not name the country, said the practice of involving foreign countries in U.S. policy-making creates "dangerous" perceptions.

Mr. Sigur, who worked with Col. North on the NSC, said he asked Col. North several times whether it was legal to solicit Contra funding from foreign countries, when he was asked to do so in the summer of 1985.

"He said, 'Absolutely. Absolutely. I wouldn't do anything that wasn't legal,'" Mr. Sigur said.

Mr. McFarlane, ending 3½ days of testimony, denied a Washington Post report that he visited the Saudi ambassador's home in McLean in February 1985 to solicit money for the Contras.

Mr. McFarlane said he did not remember such a visit and his appointment calendar did not support the newspaper report, which quoted unnamed diplomatic sources.

But, he said, he understands why the Saudis are saying they were pressured to contribute to the Contras.

"I identify and sympathize with them because they are now embarrassed, and it's our fault, my fault," Mr. McFarlane said.

Rep. Jack Brooks, Texas Democrat, said after the hearing he was not satisfied with Mr. McFarlane's response. "He waffled," Mr. Brooks said. "Waffled, waffled, waffled."

Rep. Lee Hamilton, Indiana Democrat who is chairman of the committee, also questioned inconsistencies in Mr. McFarlane's testimony.

"I have been impressed as I have sat here for these hours again and again with the clear discrepancies between what you and others in the administration told the Congress that the administration was or was not doing, and what, in fact, was done," Mr. Hamilton said.